

The Bilingual Policy of the Western Isles Islands Council

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On May 1st, 1975, the new regional boundary of the Scottish local authorities was established. All the islands of the Outer Hebrides including Lewis-Harris, North Uist, Benbecula, South Uist, and Barra were now united under the name of the Western Isles Islands Council.

One of the very first things the Council did was to introduce a bilingual policy for the entire region. This decision came from the fact that most of the people of the area speak both Gaelic and English in their everyday lives although the native Celtic language had been long neglected as the medium of any public interaction except church services and village festivals.

As stated in the Bilingual Policy: Consultative Document, the general aim of the Council's policy is 'that the Western Isles should be a fundamentally bilingual community in which Gaelic and English are used concurrently as the languages of communication, so that the people of the area can have the choice of language in as many situations as possible.'

Because of this policy the status of Gaelic is now uplifted. Since this native tongue of the Hebridian is officially recognised, it can be used not only at home but also in public. The members and the staff of the Council are expected to volunteer the leadership in the bilingual project so that they will be increasingly using Gaelic for official purposes. Moreover, the Council's service to the public is also advised to follow the bilingual system whereby the choice of language depends on the client's need. Although it encourages other institutions to join this Gaelic movement, the Council's provision of adequate bilingual school education

is the foremost important element in its language policy.

In short, this is a report on the bilingual policy of the Western Isles Islands Council, in general, and on its bilingual education, in particular, the sources of which come from the written documents and the knowledge gained through the author's expedition to the Outer Hebrides in 1978. Although we cannot yet evaluate anything about this Gaelic movement, we should at least recognise that a linguistic minority in the United Kingdom had the courage and ingenuity to make a full effort to secure and maintain their ethnic/regional identity.